

The European Parliament elections are yet another test for Italy's fragile political system

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Italian politics has traditionally produced its fair share of drama, with unstable coalitions and short-lived governments dominating the country's post-war history. Vincent Della Sala writes that the upcoming European Parliament elections in Italy will continue this trend, with the parties of the governing coalition likely to be held responsible for the country's dire economic and social position, while several opposition parties with anti-euro and anti-EU platforms could assert themselves during the campaign. He suggests that although public support for the EU continues to remain high in the country, there is a distinct lack of appetite for the EU-led reforms which have emerged as a response to the financial crisis.



European Parliament elections in Italy have rarely been more than barometers of the state of relations between political parties and of sentiment towards the sitting government. The conventional wisdom has been that there was widespread consensus among Italians that the EU was good for Italy and that Italy's preference for "more Europe" was good for everybody.

This is not likely to be the case in 2014. A little more than four months before they are due, the elections are shrouded in uncertainties in Italy. It is not clear whether they will be held simultaneously with national elections and, in the wake of a government crisis, whether the parties in the current national unity government will agree on a European policy and what sort of electoral alliances will be struck between current allies and rivals.

More importantly, the election campaign (and possibly results) may be characterised by an unprecedented level of hostility towards the European Union by a broad range of parties. While many have lamented the past indifference to European issues in EP elections, the fervour they have already aroused does not bode well for either Italy or the EU. Italy's political forces are in disarray and it is not clear who is going to make a convincing case in defence of the EU and Italy's position in it.



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The PD and the European elections

On the centre-left, the EP elections present the first test for the new leader of the *Partito Democratico* (Democratic Party – PD), Matteo Renzi, who swept to the leadership after the PD's disastrous performance in last February's national elections. Sweep is the operative word, as he has pledged to "trade in" the old party hierarchy for a new generation of leaders. There are residual tensions within the party as he tries to consolidate his position. It has also led to the paradoxical situation in which the leader of the largest party in the governing coalition has been one of Prime Minister Enrico Letta's most vocal and vociferous critics.

Renzi has accused the government of not doing enough to bring about major structural reforms in key areas of

social and economic policy. The PD will be in a tight spot during the election campaign, as it has been the central party in national unity governments since November 2011. It will have to answer for worrying levels of unemployment (youth unemployment is over 40 per cent), a stagnant economy and a tax burden that is seen to be at breaking point by most voters.

Renzi's approach has been to argue that he represents a break with the past and is willing to support the government so long as it presents solutions to pressing problems. He will have a harder time in trying to carve out a position on Europe in the campaign. The centre-left, and the PD in particular, has made deeper integration a central pillar of both domestic and European policy for the last two decades. After two years in government, it has little to show for its efforts to shift policy within the Eurozone away from a commitment to austerity. Its basic offer to voters is either that the EU needs some form of political union and/or a different macroeconomic regime. On the former, it is not clear that the case for ceding sovereignty over fiscal policy will be convincing to voters, given how little has been achieved in the last two years on the latter.

Italy's centre-right

The centre-right also provides its share of uncertainty. The largest party in the 2009 elections, the *Popolo della Libertà* (People of Liberty – PDL) has broken up into at least two parties, the reconstituted *Forza Italia* (Go Italy – FI) and the *Nuovo Centrodestra* (New Centre-Right – NCD). Central to all this is Silvio Berlusconi. Having lost his Senate seat after his criminal conviction for tax fraud, he withdrew the PDL's support for the government and declared the party (literally) over, *reviving* his first political party, FI. A faction, led by the five PDL ministers, did not follow him and created the NCD, under Deputy Prime Minister Angelino Alfano.

How these parties will contest the EP elections remains to be seen. Berlusconi and FI have clearly set out a campaign targeting the euro and supposed German hegemony of the EU. Many have written Berlusconi off, especially since he is barred from holding public office, but FI consistently polls over 25 per cent and he is a formidable campaigner. The NCD will be in much the same position as the PD, as it will have to defend the government's record and its implementation of austerity. It must somehow find a message distinct from FI but at the same time in competition with its centre-left governing allies.

Beppe Grillo and the Five Star Movement

The confusion in the traditional political families will probably work to the benefit of anti-politics movements, such as Beppe Grillo's *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement – FSM). The FSM has stumbled in parliament since its strong performance (25 per cent) in the national elections, but it continues to average around 20 per cent in opinion polls. It makes no effort to couch its anti-euro position, stating clearly that the single currency is the cause of Italy's inability to recover from the recession. It is committed to forms of direct democracy and has called for a referendum to determine the future of the euro in Italy.

Grillo has made it clear that his position is that Italy should leave the single currency and reconsider its position within the EU. The Five Star Movement will have lots of competition in trying to attract the anti-euro and anti-Europe votes. The *Northern League* and the right-wing *Fratelli d'Italia*, along with extreme right wing parties, have all taken unequivocal positions in condemning the EU as the source of Italy's poor economic performance over the last decade. On the far left, the *Sinistra Ecologia Libertà* (Left Ecology Freedom – SEL) has been opposed to the government's drive to meet EU commitments with the Fiscal Compact and is highly critical of economic governance in the EU. None of these parties is significant on its own, but combined with the other parties that will run a campaign critical of EU policies and the Italian governments that have pursued and implemented them, they may possibly produce an electoral outcome that, according to recent polls, has around two-thirds of voters casting ballots that are anything but supportive of the EU.

Consequences of the European elections for Italy

What can we expect in the next few months? First, clashes within and between the governing parties during the election campaign will weaken an already fragile government, and the divisions between the governing partners will spill over into the campaign. A Letta government, weakened by a bruising election campaign pitting governing allies against each other and electoral results favouring anti-euro parties, will have a hard time meeting the commitments of the Fiscal Compact, let alone bringing about major structural reforms.

Second, Italy remains deeply divided and that will be reflected in the elections, regardless of whether they are held simultaneously with national elections. Paradoxically, even if the elections are held simultaneously, discussions about Europe will not be marginal to domestic concerns, but will be very much part of the debate. However, it is not clear who can make the case for the major reforms needed for Italy to remain competitive in the Eurozone and for the demands that are generated by European commitments.

The frenzied final days of the Berlusconi government in the second half of 2011, when it seemed that Italy could bring down the single currency, are well behind us. But the 2014 EP elections could once again highlight how fragile governments in Italy remain a constant worry for the Eurozone. While support for the European project remains strong in Italy, there is little support for the policies required to remain in the Eurozone, and Italian governments will struggle to implement them. This is not good news for the European Union – that much is certain.

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About the author

Vincent Della Sala – *University of Trento*

Vincent Della Sala is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Trento. He is also Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, Bologna Center. He is currently a EURIAS Research Fellow at the Collegium de Lyon. His work includes research in Italian politics and EU governance.



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